



“Is the Trinity More Than a Theological Puzzle to Solve?”

Scripture – Ephesians 3:14-21

Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones

Sunday, June 16, 2019

Today is Trinity Sunday, a unique day on the Christian calendar. It is unparalleled, because, as best I can tell, this is the only day the church dedicates to a doctrine. Most of our special observances celebrate events – Easter, Christmas, Pentecost, Epiphany, Baptism of our Lord, Transfiguration of the Lord, the Ascension of Jesus, Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, and Good Friday. We also have a day dedicated to those who have died – All Saints Day – and we recognize our unity with other Christians on World Communion Sunday. However, today highlights none of these, but rather an *idea, a theological abstraction* – the doctrine of the Trinity. This is the notion that there is one God who is manifest in three distinct, yet interdependent persons. If I asked you what the Trinity is, I’m sure you would say: “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”

If I asked you to open your Bible and find the word “Trinity” as quickly as you can, how long do you think it would take you to find it? Well, it would take you from now to eternity because the word Trinity does not appear in the Bible.

All of us know that we do not worship a pantheon of gods like the Greeks did. Christians are monotheists because it is clear that the Bible speaks of God as one. Jesus said, “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one.” (Mark 12:29)

So, if the word “Trinity” does not appear in the scriptures, and we believe in one God, how did the notion of a Trinity arise? Are non-Christians correct when they accuse us of believing in three gods, not one?

While the Scriptures neither define nor explain the Trinity, we find hints of this idea. The clearest representation is found at the end of the Gospel of Matthew. According to this gospel, after the resurrection, Jesus appeared to his disciples and said, “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” (Matthew 28:19). We find a similar statement at the end of Second Corinthians when Paul wraps up his letter by saying, “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.” In both of these passages God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are grouped together, but nothing is specifically said about Jesus and the Holy Spirit being manifestations of God.

Today’s reading from the Letter to the Ephesians is another passage that has been used to support the notion of the Trinity. Paul says that he bows before the Father and prays that the disciples in Ephesus will be strengthened by God’s Spirit and that Christ will dwell in their hearts. Again, we see a grouping of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

But, how can one God be manifest in three different persons? You may have heard of attempts to explain the Trinity – how one plus one plus one equals one. Some have taught that God in three persons is like water in three different forms. Water can be liquid or ice or steam, but it is still H₂O. Others have explained the Trinity as being akin to a tree. A tree has roots, trunk, and branches, but is still one tree. These analogies might seem helpful, but they actually commit the heresy of modalism. Would anyone like to explain modalism to the rest of us? Modalism states that God is revealed in three distinct forms or modes – not three co-existing, interrelated persons.

I confess that I do not find the doctrine of the Trinity as compelling as earlier generations did. In my experience, it leads to more confusion than clarity. Stating that Jesus is God leads to all sorts of brain twisters. For instance, at the baptism of Jesus when a voice from heaven said, “This is my son with whom I am well pleased,” was God saying that he was pleased with himself? When we read that Jesus prayed, was he praying to himself?

For me, the doctrine of the Trinity is a mystery that reminds us that God is beyond our comprehension, but I am hesitant to say much more. Burn me at the stake as a heretic, but I think the doctrine of the Trinity can be more of a hindrance than a help. So I usually sidestep it.

I’m not alone in dodging this doctrine. Carl Jung, the great Swiss psychiatrist and psychoanalyst “was frustrated that his father, who was a pastor, refused to teach him anything about the doctrine of the Trinity. His father skipped the chapter on the Trinity in his confirmation book and told young Carl it was not important. He added: ‘No one knows anything about it anyway.’”¹

However, I think it is vital for us to have an understanding of God, Jesus, and God’s Spirit. Today’s passage is instructive. Paul tells the followers of Jesus living in Ephesus that he is praying that God will give them strength in their inner being through God’s Spirit. Further, he prays that Christ may dwell in their hearts so that they will be grounded in love. Finally, he prays that they may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now, is that little more than flowery religious gibberish, or is it truth we need to grasp?

Here’s how I see it. So that we do not get off track at the beginning, I need to be clear about two matters. First, Paul is focused on the non-physical realm – thoughts, feelings, intuitions, perceptions, and insights. Second, rather than talking about the Holy Spirit, which to many people sounds like something separate from the God we call Father or Creator, I find it more helpful to speak in terms of God’s Spirit.

God’s Spirit is within each person. When we pray, we are trying to open our awareness to the whispers of God’s Spirit within us and the unique mission to which God is calling us. God’s Spirit is constantly seeking to awaken us to living a Christ-like existence, which is a life grounded in love. However, since each of us is a unique person with a unique history and unique gifts, God’s call or desire for each of us is different. In general, God urges each of us to be loving, kind, forgiving, trustworthy, and generous, and to work for justice and peace. However, since we do not live life in general – each of us has a specific existence – God’s desire for each of us is tailored to our particular situation.

God’s desire for Moses and Isaiah and Jeremiah and the other prophets was far grander than for most people. Their distinct calling was to reveal certain aspects of God’s character. And to the extent they affirmed God’s prompting in them, they revealed that God is merciful and just. However, as a follower of Jesus, I believe that Jesus was the most complete revelation of who God is. Thus, it makes sense to say that he is exalted above all others. So for me, Jesus was not literally God, but he was filled with God’s Spirit more than any other person. When we look at Jesus, we see a more complete picture of God than we do in anyone else.

All of this is still very abstract and may sound as if it only pertains to people who enjoy studying theology. For those whose eyes have glazed over, let me see if I can reel you back in with a story.

A colleague tells of a woman walking down the sidewalk in Manhattan the day after retiring from a sterling career. For decades, her days had been fast-paced and deadline oriented. She pushed herself and her staff to strive for excellence. She was demanding, but fair, and enjoyed a great deal of success. But the day after retiring, she found that she had completed all of her errands for the day by 11 o'clock in the morning.

Without the endless stream of work demands, she wondered: "What am I going to do with all this time?" She also wondered who she was now that she was no longer perched behind the impressive desk in her office.

"Lost in her thoughts she stepped off the curb to cross the street when suddenly she was grabbed by the arm and yanked back. Being a New Yorker, she assumed the worst and spun around to face her assailant. She found herself inches from what appeared to be a homeless man as she heard the blaring horn of a bus that thundered behind her. The man who had saved her from certain tragedy said, 'Watch where you are going lady.' Then he began to walk away. As the confusion and fog lifted and she realized he had saved her life she called out, 'Wait. Let me give you something.' He turned around and with a toothy grin said, 'I'm fine, just heading to get some lunch.' And he disappeared down the stairs into a church basement that was serving lunch."

"The woman stood there for a moment as a range of emotions flooded over her; an adrenaline rush for coming within a whisker of tragedy; thankfulness for the man who had snatched her from disaster; and a sense of euphoria that she was safe and sound. It was an overwhelming sense of pure joy, just for being alive. She was in awe of existence itself and for whoever had given her the gift of life. She had always been impressed with herself and her accomplishments but in that moment, none of that seemed important. She was not much of a churchgoer but she found herself offering a prayer of thanksgiving. She offered a prayer that did not come from a place of need or complaint, but from a deep sense of gratitude."

The remainder of that day, she "could not shake the sense that each new moment was a gift she had received from that man on the street, or from God, or from somebody. The next morning she knew what she needed to do, even if she did not know why. She made her way back to those church steps and walked down them and offered to work a ladle, or clean the tables or whatever was needed. She felt awkward and wondered if she would be welcomed. She had never done anything like this before. But she was greeted warmly, handed a serving spoon and was soon in the thick of serving others."

Why was she there? "Maybe she was hoping to run into the man who saved her so she could thank him. Maybe she needed something to do."

I think God was active deep within her seeking to fill her with the love of Christ and it took something dramatic to awaken her to God's Spirit stirring in her soul. I think she heard God's whispers, however faint, and felt God's nudges, however slight, to show up at the church's feeding ministry.

After all, "she kept showing up day after day and soon her days were shaped by the rhythm of feeding others. Sometimes she even offers the prayer of grace before the meal. She has made friends with those she serves beside and with those she serves. It has changed her. It has changed her view of the world, her view of herself, and her view of those around her."²

As I see it, the doctrine of the Trinity can serve as a theological puzzle to solve or it can help us understand how God moves in our lives. God's Spirit moves deep within us, yearning to fill us with the love of Christ and nudging us to express that love in the concrete situations of our lives.

How might God's Spirit be working in your life right now? Is there someone you need to visit or forgive? Is there something you need to release or a corner you need to turn? Is there a commitment you need to make or a feeling of gratitude you need to express? Is there a different attitude you need to adopt or something you need to do?

If we tune our hearts and minds to God’s whispers and nudges, we can be filled with the love of Christ, be guided by God’s Spirit and live in harmony with God’s dream for our lives.

NOTES

1. Ignacio Castuera, “Lectionary Commentary,” *processandfaith.org*, for June 16, 2019.
2. Douglas T. King, “Tales of Awe,” February 10, 2019.

Prayers of the People – Sudie Niesen Thompson

God our Creator — who whispered into a formless void and beckoned the dawn — You, alone, are Lord of the cosmos. We marvel at your grace, for we know that creation was born of nothing more than your desire to be *with* and *for* the world. So, with gratitude and praise, we join our voices with the song of creation to proclaim your glory: Holy are you, O God!

God our Redeemer — who came that we might have life, and have it abundantly — our hope lies in you. We lift before you a creation groaning for redemption, and pray that you would — once again — enter into our brokenness. Be present, O God, with each body that aches from disease, and in every home that is conflict-rent ... in each community reeling from disaster, and with every person who suffers the pangs of loss. Today, we remember our neighbors throughout the world who have fled their homes in search of a better life, or any life at all. May they find refuge in communities where they enjoy safety, security, hospitality, and opportunity, and may we work for a world in which all your people flourish. God with us — we trust that you alone deliver us from bondage to freedom, from despair to hope, from death to life. So, clinging to the promise that you wipe away every tear from our eyes, we cry out: Holy are you, O Christ!

God our Sustainer — who summons us to faith, and inspires us to hope — we rejoice that you claim us as your children and commission us for service. By your grace you draw us into holy work, equip us with gifts to glorify you, and empower us to be your witnesses to the ends of the earth ... On this Fathers’ Day, we celebrate fathers, stepfathers, grandfathers, father-figures, and all who care for us with love that comforts, encourages, and challenges. We give thanks for the variety of gifts you have given these men, and for the ways they have used them to nurture, guide, protect, and provide for others. God our Comforter, we also lift before you all who find this day painful. We remember those who are grieving the loss of fathers or grandfathers, children or grandchildren. We remember those who have had difficult relationships with their fathers, and have needed to look elsewhere for love, guidance, and support. We remember those who long to be fathers, but — for whatever reason — are not. Surround them with peace, we pray, and sustain them in hope ... Spirit of God, on this and every day, we pray that you would help each of us bear witness to your grace, so that others might grasp the breadth and length and height and depth of your love for us. Send us out with joy and lead us forth in peace to sing your praise: Holy are you, O Spirit!

In the name of Jesus Christ we pray, and join our voices to offer the prayer he taught us: **Our Father ...**